

THE WORDS OF SOCRATES

by

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Socrates was fond of literary quotations. He liked reading the works of earlier philosophers and poets with his disciples and discussed the more interesting thoughts with them.¹ According to some people, however, he did this not from mere interest, but in order to be able to propagate his dangerous doctrines openly under the protection of these authorities and in this way to corrupt the young.² This idea was formulated most clearly by Polycrates in his so-called indictment, written against Socrates, years after his death.³ Thus the rhetor of the 4th century BC was the first to come to the conclusion that if we want to learn Socrates' ideas we should examine his original words, mainly his favourite literary quotations. We must agree with him, even if it is obvious that he interpreted his chosen material polemically and that he only looked for arguments to confirm Socrates' guiltiness. But what else can be expected of an indictment?

The method therefore is remarkable, and it is time to consider after 2300 years how and in what way it can be applied today. Since the publication of Gigon's book on Socrates the view that the writings about Socrates by Xenophon and Plato are the product of the literary imagination rather than authentic sources has become common.⁴ Both of them worked on the basis of works written by Socrates' former pupils and it was Xenophon who adhered to this material more faithfully.⁵ It must be added that even Aristotle had considered the "logoi Sokratikoi" as a literary and not as a philosophical work.⁶

Thus all the attempts to reconstruct Socrates' ideas on the basis of either Plato's or Xenophon's works have proved to be wrong.⁷ In my opinion, however, the fact that

¹ Xen. Mem. 1, 6, 14; Diog. Laert. 2, 22.

² Xen. Mem. 1, 2, 56; Libanios I, 62; Schol. Aristides III. 480, 133, 16 (ed. Dindorf).

³ Mesk, J.: Die Anklagerede des Polykrates gegen Sokrates, Wiener Studien 32 (1910) 56-84; Gebhardt, E.: Polykrates' Anklage gegen Sokrates und Xenophons Erwiderung, Diss. Frankfurt 1957; Toole, H.: He apologia tou Xenophontos, Platon 28 (1976) 3-8.

⁴ Gigon, O.: Sokrates, Bern 1947, 50. "Xenophon ist ein Literat, der einen gegebenen Stoff bearbeitet, freimordnet, zusammenzieht und zu einen neuen Ganzen kombiniert." Patzer, A.: Der historische Sokrates, Darmstadt 1987, 32-33.

⁵ Gigon: Sokrates, 52.

⁶ Arist. Poet. 1447 b; Rhet. 1417 a; fr. 72. Rosetti, L.: Alla ricerca dei logoi Sokratikoi perduti, Rivista di Studi Classici 22 (1974) 424-438.

⁷ Patzer, A.: Der historische Sokrates 1-40.

neither Plato nor Xenophon alone can be regarded as Socrates' mouthpiece and that both of them recreate their master rather in their own images, cannot lead to the conclusion that their works are entirely unsuitable for providing information regarding those words of Socrates which he really uttered. The parallel ideas which both Plato's and Xenophon's works include are well-known and they cannot be explained merely by the fact that both of them used the same source or that Xenophon might have plagiarized from Plato. That is to say, the fact of the same source does not exclude the possibility that the quoted, merely supposed logos, which by all means has been lost for us since then, really did convey Socrates' words. Besides, the statements concerning the question which of them used the other one's work as a source are reduced to pure guesswork by the uncertain chronology of the works of Plato and Xenophon. Moreover one should not overlook the fact that both Plato and Xenophon were Socrates' disciples, consequently one cannot exclude the possibility that they actually heard from their master some of the ideas they later wrote down.

It is not my purpose to add to the collection of thoughts that have come down to us parallelly from both authors but, following in Polycrates' footsteps, to try to find those words which were uttered by Socrates very probably in the form that they are transmitted: these are his literary quotations.

The once-heard thoughts of the master could have been distorted by memory or by the eagerness of his disciples to interpret them, but what Socrates quoted from Homer remained a quotation from Homer easy to look up long after Socrates had drunk the hemlock. Consequently, the question arises what can be regarded as a literary quotation in the works of Xenophon and Plato which comes truly from Socrates. Let us see first which quotations are mentioned by Polycrates:

- A. Hesiod, *Erga* 311⁸
- B. Pindar fr. 169 (Snell)⁹
- C. Homer, *Iliad* 2, 188 ff.¹⁰
- D. Homer, *Odys.* 19, 394¹¹
- E. Theognis I, 173-178¹²

If we compare this collection of quotations selected from Libanius' *Apologia* and from the Scholion of Aristides with the works of Plato and Xenophon we can state the following: quotation A. (Hesiod) appears in both Plato and Xenophon, quotation B. (Pindar) can only be found in Plato,¹³ quotation C. (Hom. *Il.*) can only be read in Xenophon,¹⁴ the extract from *Odyssey* (D.) can only be read in Plato,¹⁵ and these lines of Theognis are missing from both. On the basis of this we can say that the tradition preserved by Polycrates is different from both that of Plato and Xenophon and it is not

⁸ Libanius Decl. I, 85 (ed. Förster).

⁹ Libanius Decl. I, 87; fr. 152 (Bowra).

¹⁰ Schol. Aristides III. 48., 133, 16 (ed. Dindorf).

¹¹ Libanius Decl. I, 94.

¹² Libanius, Decl. I, 88; *Mesk*: Die Anklagerede 65-70; *Gebhardt*: Polykrates 21-29.

¹³ Plat. *Gorg.* 484 b; *Nomoi* 715 a; *Epist.* VIII. 354 b.

¹⁴ Xen. *Mem.* 1, 2, 58.

¹⁵ Plat. *Politeia* 334 b.

very probable (as it is suggested by Mesk and Gebhart) that either Plato or Xenophon used the indictment of the rhetor of the 4th century BC as a source.

Since the works of Plato and Xenophon are the writings we know most thoroughly and in the most authentic form among all of Socrates' disciples, let us see how frequently the literary quotations can be found in these.

In his works Plato quotes 275 extracts from the works of 38 authors.¹⁶ Most of the quotations come from Homer (116), 16 come from Euripides, 14 from Hesiod and 11 from Pindar. The list as far as frequency is concerned and not counting Euripides is identical with the one given by Libanius.¹⁷ Of the works of Xenophon I have considered only the writings dealing with Socrates (Memorabilia, Symposium, Apologia, Oeconomicos). In these four works there are 25 quotations from 8 authors. Of these 11 come from Homer or pseudo-Homer, 3 come from Hesiod, 2 from Epicharmus and only one from Theognis, though this last one is quoted on two occasions. If we consider those works of Plato which have been accepted as reliable and in which Socrates appears (i.e. we disregard *Nomoi* and *Letters*) and we compare it with the tradition preserved by Xenophon, we get the following list as a result:

1.

Γνῶθι σαυτόν

Chilon¹⁸

Xen. *Mem.* 4, 2, 24

Plat. *Charm.* 165 a

Plat. *Phaedr.* 229 e

2.

Ἔσθλ' ὧν μὲν γὰρ ἅπ' ἐσθλὰ μαθήσεαι ἦν δὲ κακοῖσι
 συμμίσγης, ἀπολείς καὶ τὸν ἔδοντα νόον.

Theognis 1, 35-36

Xen. *Mem.* 1, 2, 20

Xen. *Symp.* 2, 4

Plat. *Men.* 95 d

3.

Αὐτὰρ ἀνὴρ ἀγαθὸς τοτὲ μὲν κακός, ἄλλοτε δ' ἐσθλός.

Adesp.

Xen. *Mem.* 1, 2, 20

Plat. *Prot.* 344 d

¹⁶ Brandwood, L.: Index of Quotations, in: A word Index to Plato, Leeds 1976, 991-1003.

¹⁷ Libanius Decl. I, 62.

¹⁸ Diels, H.-Kranz, W.: Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker I, Berlin 1951⁶, 10

4.

Ἔργον δ' οὐδὲν ὄνειδος, ἀεργίη δὲ τ' ὄνειδος.

Hesiod. *Erg.* 311Xen. *Mem.* 1, 2, 57Plat. *Charm.* 163 bLibanios *Decl.* 1, 85

5.

τὴν μὲν τοι κακότητα καὶ ἰλαδὸν ἔστιν ἐλέσθαι
 ῥηιδίως· λείη μὲν ὁδός, μάλα δ' ἐγγύθι νάει·
 τῆς δ' ἀρετῆς ἰδρώτα θεοὶ προπάροιθεν ἔθηκαν
 ἀθάνατοι· μακρὸς δὲ καὶ ὄρθιος οἶμος ἐς αὐτὴν
 καὶ τρηχὺς τὸ πρῶτον· ἐπὴν δ' εἰς ἄκρον ἵκηται,
 ῥηιδίῃ δὴ ἔπειτα πέλει, χαλεπὴ περ ἐοῦσα.

Hesiod. *Erg.* 287-292Xen. *Mem.* 2, 1, 20Plat. *Prot.* 340 dPlat. *Politeia* 364 c(Plat. *Nomoi* 718 e)

6.

αὐτὸς δὲ κλινθῆναι εὐπλέκτῳ ἐνὶ δίφρῳ,
 ἥκ' ἐπ' ἀριστερὰ τοῖν· ἀτὰρ τὸν δεξιὸν ἵππον
 κένσαι ὁμοκλήσας, εἷξαι τέ οἱ ἡνία χερσίν.

Hom. *Il.* 23, 335-337Xen. *Symp.* 4, 6Plat. *Ion* 537 a

7.

..., ἐπὶ δὲ κρόμυον, ποτῶ ὄψον.

Hom. *Il.* 11, 630Xen. *Symp.* 4, 7Plat. *Ion.* 538 c

8,

ποιμένα λαῶν

Hom. *Il.* 2, 243Xen. *Mem.* 3, 2(Plat.) *Min.* 321 c

These are those 8 quotations which according to the preceding train of thoughts can certainly be regarded as Socrates' favourite literary examples. Yet, seeing the list of authors, the question arises whether or not we are simply faced with the hackneyed commonplaces of the 5th-4th century Athens quoted by everybody at every turn. Could

it be that all the schoolboys in Athens rattled off these authors' citations since these formed the backbone of the curriculum?

I have only two objections against this. 1. Why should Socrates quote from authors unknown to his audience when the quotations of the popular and highly respected works are exactly the ones which are the most suitable for supporting his arguments. 2. On the other hand, however, it is also true that these citations cannot be found at every turn, at least not in the contemporary works of literature. Herodotus e.g. mentions the works of Hesiod only three times but he does not quote them word by word at all. He quotes undoubtedly from Homer only twice and two more citations from Homer in Book II of Herodotus are probably the result of interpolation.¹⁹ Thucydides quotes only Hymn to Apollo from Homer,²⁰ and he refers to his works in general four times more; he only mentions Hesiod's name with reference to the allegation that the poet was killed in Nemea.²¹ The works of Theognis and Epicharmus are not even mentioned by these two historiographers. Therefore it can be stated that even in such lengthy works as that of Herodotus and Thucydides the great number of quotations was not as usual as in the Socratic literature and that the quotations ascribed to Socrates were still not rattled off by every schoolboy in Athens. For the sake of completeness, however, it must be added that the quotation from Theognis can be found in two places in Aristotle (and he obviously did not only know them because he was a pupil of Plato).²² In addition to this, quotation No 5 from Hesiod was often in common use in later centuries but the contemporaries of Plato and Xenophon did not find them worthy of much attention.²³

What kind of conclusions can be drawn from these words of Socrates which by all appearance were uttered by him?

The quotations usually come from the early works of Plato (Protagoras, Charmides, Ion), consequently from those writings on which the most direct influence of Socrates was noticed.²⁴ The later ones (Phaedros, Politeia, Nomoi) only repeat the formerly used citations. Therefore the quotations reinforce the former observations according to which the early dialogues of Plato come presumably nearest to the original Socratic ideas.

Can the conveyance of the logoi be noticed in these dialogues? From a formal point of view it cannot be discerned, since the dialogues usually do not start with the enumeration of intermediary persons like Sympson;²⁵ moreover, the stories are told by Socrates himself (Protagoras), which is not impossible after all and so Plato had the opportunity to be informed about certain events by the master himself, furthermore about his favourite phrases and quotations from poems.

The same can be said about Xenophon. A few citations appear on two or three

¹⁹ Herod. 2, 116 = Hom. II. 6, 289, ff; Od. 4, 227 ff; Od. 4, 351 f; Herod. 4, 29 = Hom. Od. 4, 85.

²⁰ Thuk. 3, 104, 4-6.

²¹ Thuk. 3, 96, 1.

²² Arist. Eth. Nik. 1170 a 12; 1172 a 14.

²³ Ostrakon Berol. 12319; *Rzach, A.*: Hesiodi Carmina, Leipzig 1902, 178-183; *Merkelbach, R.-West, M.L.*: Hesiodi Opera, Oxford 1970, 61; *West, M.L.*: Works and Days, Oxford 1978, 229.

²⁴ *Patzner, A.*: Sokrates als Philosoph, in: Der historische Sokrates, 434-452.

²⁵ *Nickel, R.*: Xenophon, Darmstadt 1979, 125-126.

occasions in Plato, and examples for this can also be found in Xenophon (the quotation from Theognis is mentioned in both *Symposium* and *Memorabilia* of Xenophon). This reinforces the possibility that here we have one of Socrates' favourite citations.

One more problem arises, however, in connection with these quotations: in the sources, they are not always uttered by Socrates but sometimes by his interlocutor. Such quotations, e.g. the citations from Hesiod (4.) which is quoted by Critias in *Charmides*, similarly quotation No 1 is also uttered by him in the same dialogue. However, this latter is quoted by Socrates himself in *Phaidros*. Therefore it seems unimportant after all by whom the Socratic idea is uttered in Plato and Xenophon. Examples for this method can be found in Xenophon too: the citation from Hom. *Il.* 3, 179 is uttered by Socrates in *Xen. Mem.* 3, 2; whereas in *Xen. Symp.* 4, 6 it is cited by Anthisthenes.

The quotations can be divided into five groups as far as their subject matter is concerned. The first one is the Delphic inscription encouraging to know thyself which for that matter could also be the brief summary of Socrates' activity (1.). Man should be the subject of philosophy and not the Universe because it is not worth dealing with other confusing and complicated matters until we do not know everything about ourselves.

The second group includes the quotations from Theognis (2.) and Hesiod (5.) dealing with the relation of virtue and vileness. A line of a poem (3.) also belongs to this group. The latter ones reflect the popular Socratic idea, namely the faith that virtue can be taught. Virtue can be acquired by moving in the company of men of virtue and following good examples; though it is difficult to acquire, those who succeed in doing so have the chance not to be derailed any more.

The third one, the quotation from Hesiod (4.) seems to be the simplest. It is the praise of work. However, both Plato and Xenophon try to contest this meaning of the citation. They probably followed their master in doing so; this coincided with the public opinion of the century which despised physical work, especially if done for wages. This latter citation, therefore, does not indicate how highly Socrates respected work, but how he used citations of the great poets. Maybe Polycrates was right on this point to a certain extent.

The fourth group is quite remarkable. The 6th and 7th quotation from Homer appear in a single train of thoughts in both Xenophon and Plato. The essence of the reasoning is whether it is possible to acquire practical knowledge from the works of great poets (namely of Homer), to what extent Homer was an expert in the questions he wrote about, and to what extent the poets and the readers of the epics become experts e.g. in driving the chariot or making curative potions by learning the text of the epics. Socrates' answer is quite sceptical in both cases. In this case it is very likely that Plato and Xenophon heard the train of thoughts together with the quoted examples or at the same time or they used the same source (for, unlike Patzer I am not of the opinion that it is so self-evident that Xenophon relied on the works of Plato).²⁶

The fifth group contains quotation No 8 from Homer. The idea it refers to is clear: leaders and commanders should be like good shepherds. Moreover it is also likely that the application of such typical and recurring turns of phrase were quite frequent in

²⁶ See N. 24.

everyday coverstaions of the Athenians in the 5th-4th century B.C. What creates the problem is rather that *Minos* is not an original work of Plato. Yet, I have left the quotation among the others to illustrate that the outworn Homeric idioms could form a part of Socrates' quoting technique in the same way as the longer and less frequently used citations. It must be added, however, that the Socratic image in some of the pseudo-Platonic dialogues was probably closer to the historical Socrates than that in the genuine writings of Plato.²⁷

It is difficult to state much more than this about the original words of Socrates without taking the risk of ascribing one of the followers' ideas to the master. Searching for the historical Socrates, however, teaches us not to be pretentious. Geffken has devoted two separate essays to the exploration of two words of Socrates.²⁸ Maybe this brief essay has proved that besides those we can find other "authentic" statements of Socrates: his favourite literary quotations.

²⁷ Tarrant, D.: "The pseudo-Platonic Socrates", CQ 32 (1938) 167-173.

²⁸ Geffken, J.: "Zwei Sokratesworte", Rheinisches Museum 84 (1935) 241-249.